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UNCLAS ABU DHABI 000953

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR G/TIP, INL, DRL, NEA/RA AND NEA/ARPI

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: NEWLY CREATED HUMAN RIGHTS NGO SETS TIP AS A PRIORITY

REF: ABU DHABI 780

1. (U) Summary: On March 7, the Emirates Human Rights Association (EHRA) met for the first time since being approved by the Ministry of Social Affairs on February 18. They elected a seven-member board of governors, three of whom are women. The new board announced plans to focus its immediate attention on the problems of human trafficking and domestic worker abuse, and to publish an annual human rights report for the UAE. Several members declined to vote in protest over the exclusion of one person's name from the list of founding members. Members of the newly formed board affirmed that the exclusion was not due to any interference from the Ministry of Social Affairs. End Summary.

2. (SBU) Identifying the challenges facing the new organization, chair-elect Abdul Hussein told a local newspaper, "We have to address issues in the country that we're not usually comfortable with, such as human trafficking." Board member Ebtisam al-Kitbi, a political science professor with a long association to the Embassy and Consulate General, added to PolOff that publishing a human rights report may be an ambitious goal for the organization, but it is one that is necessary "if we wish to join the community of advanced nations," and show that "we are serious" about human rights issues. The EHRA announced that they plan to annually publish an independent human rights report for the UAE. Following the board elections, al-Kitbi affirmed to the press that "we need to institutionalize a system of checks in balances" in order to assure the dignity of every human being in the country. And board member Khalfan al-Muhairy, speaking about the plight of unpaid laborers and abused domestic workers, vowed to "deal with these problems properly," explaining to the local press that "the whole UAE pays the price" for these abuses.

3. (SBU) Prior to the election of the board, six of the 32 founding members declined to participate in protest over the exclusion of Mohammed Fahd al-Dehim's name from the list of founding members. RefTel reported that al-Dehim was one of the primary organizers of the EHRA, but that his independence was suspect. According to Mohammed Ghobash, although al-Dehim had worked with him and the Ministry from the beginning in setting up the organization, al-Dehim had failed to follow up on adding his own name to the final membership list and subsequently was not included on the Ministry's registry of members.

4. (SBU) On March 11, Al-Dehim filed a protest with the Ministry of Social Affairs and called for the Board of Governors to be dissolved and a new election held after the error is resolved. A Ministry official responded by saying that the law does not allow them to alter the membership list of the organization, but that al-Dehim could join the organization once the membership is opened to the public. Until that time he can attend all the meetings, but cannot vote. Al-Dehim told PolOff that Ghobash had been responsible for following up on the organization's registration procedures, and that Ghobash had assured him that everything had been taken care of with the Ministry. Al-Kitbi assured PolOff that the exclusion of al-Dehim from the membership rolls was not/not due to interference from the Ministry of Social Affairs. (Comment: It appears that al-Dehim is upset because he had aspired to be elected as the Chair of the Board of Governors, and now cannot pursue that for at least two more years. It is encouraging to see that the organization's leadership specifically called trafficking in persons and domestic worker abuse as primary foci since the 2005 HRR also highlighted these issues. End Comment.)

5. (U) EHRA's elected governing board consists of businessman Abdul Ghafar Hussein, journalist and Dubai TV political commentator Ayisha Sultan, Director of the Abu Dhabi Cultural Foundation Khalfan al-Muhairy, physician Ali Shakr, and UAE University professors Mohammed Ghobash, Ebtisam al-Kitbi, and Hessa Lootah.

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